7: Thompson--373 J-4 (no date) 1937 Laotians
116, 193, 536, 538

"The Laotian tongue is very simple. It is mainly monosyllabic: the article is never used, and substantives are not declined. Profane literature includes historical works, chiefly the annals of Luang-Prabang as well as its codes of law, novels, and songs. There is a large sacred literature, a very small part of which has been translated from Pali into the vernacular. Their drama is akin to the Khmers' in length, costuming, and music. The themes are epic, religious, or bellicose history, love stories and legends, mostly taken from the Vedas, the Ramayana, and Mahabharata. Many Khmer and even Burmese plays, with a modern satirical tone, lend a cosmopolitan character to the Laotian repertoire. A kind of marionette theatre, analogous to the Javanese, exists as well."

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24 letters on a falling tone, or low letters.
These forty-four letters can be broken down into:
18 consonants;
5 vowels;
21 diphtongs.

The Siamese language has five tones:

1. Long recto tono and short recto tono;
2. Long circumflex tone, short circumflex tone and very short circumflex tone;
3. Long falling tone and short falling tone;
4. Long rising tone and short rising tone;
5. Long acute tone and short acute tone.

To represent these tones there are four accents which are placed above the syllables or vowels.

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Nouns or substantives. The simple nouns are in large part monosyllabic. Only a few are polysyllabic. The compound nouns are formed of two words.

A large number of verbs and adjectives can be changed into substantives by means of a prefix. From the grammatical point of view, nouns do not have any gender or number. To distinguish between men and women a suffix is used which designates sex. In the case of animals, except for a few exceptions, the name is the same for the male and for the female. The male or female prefix is added to distinguish between them.

Numerals and numerical designations. Nouns do not have any number, and this is compensated for by adding expressions signifying [143] singular or plural, but which vary with each object. In French, for example, we would say "two kings, several leaders." In Siamese they say "kings, two persons; leaders, several persons."

These numerals are different, depending on whether it is a question of men, animals, plants or various objects.

For men, for example, there are three numerals. One applies to everybody, the second is used for God, the king, princes, priests and great men, and the third is used only for bonzes.

There are also thirty-five numerals which apply to animals, plants, fruit, material things, books, clothing, grain, flowers, stars, jewels, cloth, packages, string, thread, carts, weapons, etc.

Adjectives. Certain expressions may be construed either as adjectives or as substantives or verbs, depending on the construction of the sentence. A suffix after the noun forms a descriptive adjective,

193 while a prefix before the noun transforms it into a demonstrative adjective. The comparative is expressed by a suffix placed after the noun.

There are eleven expressions to indicate the superlative. They are used as prefixes or suffixes in accordance with fixed rules.

Personal pronouns. There are eleven pronouns for the first person which vary in accordance with the status of the speaker and the person being spoken to.

There are ten for the second person and eight for the third.

Possessive pronouns. There is no such pronoun in Siamese. It is replaced by the genitive of the person or animal which possesses.

Relative pronouns. They are in the number of three, and stand before the object which they modify.

Interrogative pronouns. They are five in number. When repeated they become relative or indefinite and signify, for example, whoever instead of who, whatever instead of what, etc.

Verbs. Verbs do not have conjugations, moods, tenses or persons. Like nouns, they are always invariable. Some semblance of conjugation may nevertheless be achieved by means of particles or auxiliary words. These words, in the number of eleven, change the [144] meaning of sentences by expressing an action or an idea, according as they stand before the verb or after.

Principal adverbs. There are seventy-eight principal adverbs. Moreover, certain nouns or adjectives take an adverbial form by means of seven particles which are placed after them.

Prepositions and conjunctions. There are twenty-eight main prepositions and twenty-five conjunctions (1).

[113]

(1) Pallegoix, Dictionnaire siamois-français-anglais, 1896.

212 194 The Lao or Laotian language. The Lao alphabet is composed of twenty-eight letters divided into fourteen simple or compound consonants and fourteen vowels or diphthongs. They are divided into three classes, as follows:

1. Six letters on a rising or aspirated tone;
2. Eight letters on a middle or recto tone;
3. Fourteen letters on a falling or low tone.

To obtain the grave, long grave, short, open and close tones, signs and accents are used. These may be placed above or below the consonant, or may be formed by joining certain vowels and

[76] LAOTIAN WRITING AND LANGUAGE

212 Laotian writing has an alphabet. It is written from left to right. The Laotian characters derive from the Thai writing created by King Rama Kamheng of Sukhodya in A. D. 1283. But this Thai writing is merely a substitute for the cursive form of the writing of inscriptions in ancient Khmer of Cambodia. This explains the striking similarities of Laotian and Khmer letters.

The tham characters are used especially in religious texts, but also sometimes in novels.

Two other writings close to the Laotian alphabet are the lu, whose use is localized in the extreme north, and the yuon, used at Xieng Mai and in the bordering provinces.

213 The Laotian manuscripts written on four lines are engraved with a pointed instrument on palm leaves of varying length pierced with two holes, at one third and at two thirds of their length. The cord which is to hold them together must only be put through the hole on the left side. A bundle of about twenty leaves forms a phuk (pronounced p'ouk). These phuk are grouped in bundles (mat) which are wrapped up in a piece of cloth or else they are put in a pile held at the top and bottom by two wooden boards, and pierced from right to left with a double series of holes through which a thin cord is passed. The two extremities are tied in a knot used to carry this mass.

[77] The Laotian Language

194 It is a tonal language. It possesses three series of letters, medium, high and low.

193 Morphology. The purely Laotian words rarely have more than two syllables. There is no article. The words are invariable. There is no gender, nor number, only generic terms used to define men, animals, vegetables, etc. The generic categories are numerous. There is one used for leaves and all that is flat, another for round and elongated objects, such as trees and columns, etc., in all there are about twenty.

Like the other words, the verb is invariable. Verbal time is unknown, but there are auxiliaries indicating a completed action. Personal pronouns differ according to whether the person addressed is an inferior, an equal or a superior. [554]

Syntax. Laotian construction is direct: subject, verb, object. The determinant follows the determined. A question is made without

inverting the order of words. The negation bo is added. Is the gentleman home? is translated Tan you ban bo? Sometimes a single word contains a whole phrase:

mi = there are.
dai = it is possible.

Vocabulary. In addition to the pronunciation of sounds, one of the difficulties of the Laotian language is the distinction between noble language and popular language. The language is different when one addresses the bonzes, the high dignitaries, the king. There is a very rich concrete and abstract Laotian vocabulary which unfortunately is tending to go out of use. We have found in manuscripts Laotian words translating textually [78] abstract Pali words, but they have been gradually forgotten. The Laotians no longer read enough of their original texts. Cheap Siamese literature has invaded the country making the people abandon their own language.

One of the urgent tasks is to bring back the old Laotian texts into honor and to spread them abroad again among the public.

[79] LITERATURE AND MUSIC

In addition to the canonical religious literature already discussed, Laos possesses an important literary treasury. But as in Cambodia, Siam and Burma, this literature is anonymous. We are in the presence of epic texts of Indian origin, of legendary traditions, of apologues, of legal, moral or comic tales. There exist also novels, but as in French "romances" of the Middle Ages, they are by unknown authors. There is no equivalent in Laos of a Kalidasa or of a Li T'ai-po. No philosopher or dramatic author is known.

If the name of a French writer were mentioned whose manner is closest to that of Laotian authors, it would be that of Charles Perrault, and this in a word characterizes the type of Laotian literature. It excels in wonderful tales.

Literature of Indian Inspiration.

In addition to the Jatakas, Laos possesses at least two great texts of Indian origin. This is said under reservation of further discoveries, for in spite of the important work of Louis Finot, "Recherches sur la littérature laotienne," we are still far from knowing all the treasures of the Laos pagodas.

a) The Pancatantra. The first text is a collection of tales copied from the famous Indian Pancatantra. In the Middle Ages